

CERTAIN BASIC MISCONCEPTIONS IN THE FIELD OF HISTORY. ANCIENT GREEKS, THE WEST AND THE MODERN WORLD*

Dr. Yaman ÖRS**

The past has had an immense impact upon us, an inevitable impact that has for the most part been not positive in many domains. This has been all the more so in those fields where scientific accuracy is not applicable, and subjectivity, prejudice and misinterpretation often prevail. I think we can find no better example of this than the interpretation of historical events, that is, those happenings of the remote or recent past which have had a general appeal to or importance for societies and /or individuals.

Here I shall try to put forward some misconceptions which are, I think, quite widespread, closely related, and of great practical as well as theoretical importance. I shall analyse these from certain essential aspects and attempt to explain the factors involved.

At the centre of our discussion are going to be such themes as the self-identification of the Western world with ancient Greek civilization, the division of history into certain ages, the matter of its beginning, and the lack of a truly universal calendar.

The Historical Flow and its Explanation

We can say that even in its crudest form, history differs from annals or chronicles in that it presupposes, usually, an explanation of (the causes and origin of) events and not just

*For their revision of the article I owe thanks to Cenk Örs from the Foreign Trade Department, Ministry of Commerce, to Drs. Oral Sander and Sina Akşın from the Faculty of Political Sciences, Ankara, Departments of Political History and Turkish Political Life respectively, and to E.J.F.

**Department of the History of Medicine, Ankara Medical Faculty.

an account of them¹. Nor is it just historiography². Freed from a static conception and narration, it assumes a scientific character.

Whether history is a science like any other or not has been the subject of long debate for the past few centuries. The methodological approach has changed according to the intellectual, philosophical inclination of the time. During the eighteenth century, for instance, many believed that the time was near when all things would be explained by means of a universal physics. The methods of Newton were seen as applicable to the whole of nature. By the latter half of the nineteenth century and with the Hegelian distinction between spirit and nature in the background, certain influential philosophers felt impelled to make a sharp distinction between those sciences which take as their subject matter the physical nonhuman world and those in which man is studied as a being with mind. There were two scientific methodologies, instead of one, to be worked out. The logical structure of historical explanation, which belonged to the human sciences, was taken to be essentially different from the explanation of physical phenomena³.

The development of dialectical materialism has brought a completely different approach to history. It has conferred upon the latter *dynamism* on the one hand, and a *meaning* which is objectively acceptable, on the other. But this is too general an approach to explain the historical events organically, so to speak, and although one feels as a matter of fact compelled to consider it in a general discussion on history, we can well dispense with a direct consideration of it in this context. These events are too complex to be brought to light under a single approach however *basic* that may be. Therefore, the socio-economic view of historical change would also be insufficient without a serious consideration of other factors involved. Besides, and so far as I can

1 Webster's New International Dictionary of The English Language, 2nd edit. (1957) and Webster's Third New Internat. ... (1961), A Merriam Webster (Springfield (Mass.): G. and C. Merriam).

2 Oral Sander, "Tarihte Yöntem", ("Method in History"), *Ank. Üni. Siyasal Bil. Fak. Derg.*, 1974, pp. 59-71.

3 Rudolph H. Weingartner, "Historical Explanation", In P. Edwards (ed. in chief): *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan and the Free Press, 1967, vol. 4, pp. 7-12.

see, it would not help us much to discuss our points from the dialectical standpoint directly.

The solution must lie in the recognition of the plurality of factors leading to the events under discussion and of the *laws* (generalizations) applicable to them. Laws are applicable to many components of the event to be explained, and it is part of the historian's task to analyse the event into these explicable components. On this account, then, the explanation of a historical event is a conjunction of explanations of the component events into which it is analysed. Such an explanation meets the requirements placed upon it by an adequate theory of causality and, more generally, by an acceptable theory of knowledge⁴.

A comprehensive attempt has been made by A.J. Toynbee to explain historical events analytically, and I find his study worth summarizing and discussing. His endeavour was analytical because he tried to see these complex events from biological, geographical, social, psychic and other aspects. He has also seen them as *historical events*, that is, in their own right, so that he might arrive at scientific conclusions at that complex level as well.

The disputed points in his interpretations and generalizations on historical development need not detain us here. What matters in this context is the presence of certain conclusions in his study that will throw light on our theme.

Toynbee begins his "Study of history" with an attempt to find *units* in his field like those in the so-called positive or exact sciences. That is to say, with a view to giving a positive, scientific quality to his socio-political study of history, he is searching for a *subject unit* as an equivalent of those found in those sciences. His units are great societies, civilizations, and their number is just over twenty. From the standpoint of scientific study, he calls them also "intelligible fields". What they have in common is an evolutionary development which shows certain stages such as origin, growth, fall and disappearance.

Toynbee's point of departure in his quest has been the division of societies into two. One group includes the so-called "primitive societies". These are restricted to relatively narrow

4 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

geographical areas and embrace relatively small numbers of human beings. Their origin dating back to perhaps 300.000 years ago, their number is overwhelmingly higher. Two very important features of these human communities are that they are relatively short-lived and the process of development is too slow to show the level of organization that would lead to "civilized societies". So far as the scientific study is concerned, they are the subject units of anthropology⁵.

Civilizations, the subject units of history, on the other hand, are distinguished by their known development and longer existence. Their spatial dimensions are likewise much greater. They comprise incomparably more individuals and first appeared only some few thousand years ago⁶.

Their number being just over twenty, says Toynbee, civilizations remain inconveniently few as units of scientific study and for the formulation of laws in the field of history. In (exact or positive) science the number of such units, that is, phenomena, are sufficient to allow us to formulate general laws. In fiction, finally, such points, "facts", are too numerous to survey and to arrive at general conclusions⁷.

Toynbee's concept of history is essentially cyclic. His theory is based on certain successive stages through which every civilization has passed, the original development being due to the interaction of certain physical and social challenges such as harsh climatic conditions and disintegrating neighbouring societies. These challenges have played a crucial role in the process. The stages, according to Toynbee, reappear in every great society unless growth has been arrested for some reason or it has been abortive from the very beginning because of the excessiveness of challenges. And there is no such thing as the unity of civilization but there are relationships among the civilizations such as war, or influences in art, or in other domains.

So far as I can see, these are the main points of his view. And we may now criticize one or two points in this view before considering the concrete themes of our discussion.

5 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, abr. by D.C. Somervell, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 35.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 35-43.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 43-47.

First, his avoidance of change in the general flow. There may be, and I believe that there are, certain similarities of development between, say, the ancient Chinese and Andean civilizations. And also between the evolution of ancient Egyptian civilization and that of the Western society. As a whole, however, there is a human progress or evolution, for good or evil. Not that I am in favour of any teleological explanation. I believe in no purposeful or determinately directional evolutionary flow. But there is a general development, a change to be seen objectively, a psycho-socio-biological evolution. Who can say, within the boundaries of sanity, that there has been slight or no change between the extinct civilizations and today's world so far as such different areas as science, the outlook on nature and the universe, or human rights are concerned? What about the general socio-economic change in theory and in the concrete situation? We are not necessarily in a better world in every aspect, but we are in a world completely different from any stage of any former civilization. *Nothing new under the sun* is an uncritically uttered, commonplace and even nonsensical *cliché* reflecting a static, conservative way of looking at things. There can be general resemblances, stages of development. In concrete terms, however, there has been a continuity, smooth here, sinuous there. And the future is going to be different, to this or that extent in this or that domain, from today.

There can be no better proof of this, in biological terms, than the human deployment and population explosion concerning the whole surface of the earth.

In historical terms and quite importantly and interestingly, our time has no parallel in the past in a most general aspect. The socio-economic, scientific, technological, mental and other changes concern all the countries and communities. The world is going to be more and more unified, related, whether positively (science) or negatively (war). The products of thought and of science influence and change almost every part of the world. There may not be any unification, in the foreseeable future at least, culturally, racially, politically and so on. But there is going to be a unity so far as the concept of civilization in general terms is concerned. The impact of *the West* is felt everywhere, and the changes and original features elsewhere influence, in turn,

the Western world. It does not seem to be an exaggeration to say that in a not too distant future humanity will constitute a single community. Its political features need not concern us here. It may be this or that. But it is going to be a *single civilization*.

Now, if this supposition is in fact justified, there will be no more room for any other society which will be one of the subject units of historical study. Because the necessary spatial possibilities for its development will have been exhausted. It may be assumed that the disintegration of *the world society* would lead to the development of other, *local* ones in the course of time. Even if that turns out to be the case and the same stages as before come into being, the time span must surely be so wide that hundreds, thousands of years will have to pass for the emergence of new subject units. In reality, this question of time is relevant in any case and one should ask Toynbee how many thousands, even tens and hundreds of thousands of years have to pass so that a sufficient number of civilizations as subject units of scientific historical study may emerge. And among the probabilities is the extinction of the human species or the evolutionary development of another species from it with more or less different characteristics of socio-economic and political organization. Consequently, there seems to be no room for the development of a *science of history* in which great human societies could be studied in a way that would be truly scientific.

One solution to Toynbee's numerical dilemma, however partial it may seem in his terms, might be to consider smaller units, the *organized states* instead of civilizations. They have got the central body of authority responsible for the general state of affairs within their spatio-temporal boundaries. This consideration could lead us to a socio-economic approach either identical with or similar to that of Marx and his followers. Besides the limitation of space here, the topic has the characteristic of being too general to discuss in a treatment of the historical flow in rather usual limits. It could also lead us to the sort of reductionism you might find in a discussion (at its own level) of a biological theme from the standpoint of, say, chemistry only. It must suffice here to say that Marx was not a historian but a philosopher for whose views history was a vitally important mine of material.

Toynbee has not been the only historian, in general terms, with cyclic views on historical development. To avoid the dilemma of circularity and nonconsideration of the general progress or, at least, development, they have unified the circular and developmental approaches. Thus, not a circular but spiral development has emerged. According to Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth century thinker and historian, every age gets new elements from the former, assimilates them, and hands them down to the succeeding age. And the process goes on⁸. This is the spiral theory of history⁹. Such a view seems more realistic or less unrealistic.

A word, before proceeding further, for the phrase *historical flow*. What I mean by this has nothing whatever to do with any of the usually one-sided views or interpretations of history. There are those who see the historical events dynamically, in an evolutionary setting. There exists, in fact, a general flow that shows evolution - *evolution*, however, not necessarily in an affirmative but objective sense, as I have discussed before. As there can be no stop to time, there has been and will always be an ongoing, a flow with no return, as much for human societies as for everything else. And that is just it.

What is "the West"?

In an edition of one of the foremost dictionaries in English, one definition of the word "history" is "the branch of knowledge that records and explains past events as steps in human progress; ... it is usually divided into ancient history, medieval history and modern history"¹⁰. Surely this is too commonplace a division for the reader. I need only remind him or her of such related words as ages, times, periods, and so on, qualified with the above adjectives: *the ancient times*, *the middle ages* or *the medieval period*, *the modern age*. (In a later edition of this dictionary, particularly the second part of the statement is importantly different: "... usually used with a qualifying adjective - medieval history, European history"¹¹.)

8 Sander, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

9 Patrick Gardiner, "Vico, Giambattista," In P. Edwards (ed. in chief): *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan and the Free Press, 1967, vol. 8, pp. 247-51.

10 Webster's New Internat. ... (1957), *op. cit.*

11 Webster's Third New Internat. ... (1961), *op. cit.*

At this point the purpose of my relatively lengthy consideration of Toynbee's "societies" emerges. However and in whatever aspects criticizable his views may be on the points we have discussed and on others we have not, there remains a certain skeleton or residue which, I think, stands criticism. This is the historian's consideration of societies or civilizations as intelligible fields (though they are not positively scientific units) in the field of history.

Why *ancient times*, the *middle ages*, the *modern period*? According to what or by what criteria?

According to a division made by certain historians, authors, intellectuals from what we call *the West*. The western writer, being essentially the product of the Renaissance, has identified himself and his *society* with the Greek (Greco-Roman) civilization that influenced him so much. He has regarded himself as *belonging to* the civilization founded in Greece (and Western Anatolia). Thus, in the beginning, that is *in the ancient times*, were the ancient Greeks. Christendom replaced or succeeded the Greco-Roman society and brought the (*dark*) middle ages. With the coming of the Renaissance begins the *new* or modern ages¹².

The societies contemporaneous with or older than the ancient Greeks were classified among, or rather as, the ancient civilizations. Those more or less contemporaneous with the Christian society, the Islamic society for instance, were placed into the *middle ages* group. This sort of division is perhaps more readily seen in the treatment of the development of scientific fields or art - medical history, history of painting, and so on.

Such a "unity of civilization" is a myth and that this is so has been clearly and beautifully explained by Toynbee¹³. "... that there are not ... distinct representatives of such a species of society but only one civilization ... is a misconception into which modern Western historians have been led by the influence of their social environment"¹⁴.

12 Yaman Örs, "Tarihin Başlangıcı, Çağlara Bölünmesi." ("The Beginning of History and its Division into Ages"), *Cumhuriyet*, Jan. 19, 1975.

13 Toynbee, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-41.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

This mistaken conception is due, I believe, to the widespread inclination of bias, a psycho-social disease, so to say: *belonging to* and thus *owning the grandeur* of the past as well as, as the case may be, the present! (I shall elaborate this topic in the last chapter.)

Whatever the underlying reason(s) may be, the mistaken claim seems to have two phases. In the first the western historian or intellectual unites the ancient Greeks, Christendom and the modern (and most of the time exclusively western) world. In the second, when any other society outside this *flow* is considered, it has to be placed in the ancient or middle ages, although their development occupies different slices of time. From the Chinese to the Andean society, civilizations with so different temporal as well as spatial development have to obey this distinction. In fact, however, there can be no temporal comparison between these societies because they do not necessarily coincide in time. They merely show similar developmental characteristics or stages such as those established by Toynbee.

So, most writers and intellectuals, in western countries particularly, have in general been in the habit of seeing Western civilization, whose development began with the Renaissance (or Christendom), as a continuation of Greek civilization¹⁵. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, for instance, commits this mistake in his *History of Western philosophy* where he begins with the ancient Greek philosophers¹⁶.

True, Western civilization has developed by being very much influenced by the ancient Greeks in respect of general outlook on nature and the universe, positive and rational thought, the importance given to artistic decoration, and so on. Its development has in fact been very much dependent upon the latter. It has been "affiliated to" it, to use Toynbee's phrase, that is, related to or connected with it. This does not mean, however, that there has existed a direct connection in space-time, or some sort of continuity¹⁷. The Greco-Roman society develo-

15 Yaman Örs, "Eski ve 'Yeni' Yunanlılar", *Cumhuriyet*, Sep. 1, 1974. ("The Ancient and 'Modern' Greeks", *Turkish Daily News*, Oct. 1, 1974).

16 Bertrand Russell, *Wisdom of the West. A Historical Survey of Western Philosophy in its social and political setting*, London: Macdonald, 1960.

17 Örs, *op. cit. loc. cit.*

ped and then came to an end with the downfall of the Roman Empire. In the so-called middle ages there was the "Christian society" that later formed the nucleus of the Western civilization. (According to Toynbee's analysis, however, the Christianity outside the Orthodox world is within the Western society.)¹⁸

Thus, we can at best say that Western civilization began with the development of Christianity, if not with the Renaissance, and surely not with the ancient Greeks. And a division of history into ancient, middle and new ages is not applicable even in the case of Western civilization let alone to other civilizations either older than or contemporaneous with it¹⁹.

We may use the word *Western*, apart from qualifying the *Western society*, only in a very wide sense with no definite borders in space-time. Even then, however, and at best, we may use it to express certain general characteristics of the geographically western societies in comparison with or in contrast to those of the eastern civilizations. And definitely not, again, to mean a western civilization that would also include the ancient Greek society²⁰.

Rationality, for instance, has in general been attributed to the *West* and mysticism has been accepted as a trait of the eastern societies. This seems only roughly true and surely not in an absolute sense. There have lived many rational thinkers and men of science in the East, and many mystics and mystical thinkers who have actively contributed to the western intellectual life.

When anyone uses the word *west* or *western* in such a comprehensive historical-geographical sense, he or she must know that spatially it cannot mean any civilization or society but only a region of the world, roughly what is called Europe, with or without the Americas, as the case may be.

Who are the "Ancient Greeks"?

It seems justifiable to say that without the ancient Greek society there could have been no Western civilization as we

18 Örs, *op. cit.* (1975).

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

know it today. But it is also true that no society could have been born or developed if it had not come under the influence of older, and especially neighbouring contemporaneous communities and civilizations. The ancient Greek society, for its part, developed under the influence of Minoan (Cretan), Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations. This we can assert without forgetting the economy (for example, marine commerce), the existence of capable thinkers, artists and others, and additional factors²¹.

According to Toynbee, the ancient Greek, or Hellenic, civilization is only affiliated to the Minoan civilization in Crete, and loosely at that²². I think this claim is only partly true. The influence of Egypt must have been much greater than classically supposed. Just to see the Karnak and Luxor temples of the ancient city of Thebes, the first one dating back to 4.000 years ago, will enlighten anyone on the origin of the post-and-lintel system in architecture, especially in that of colossal temples. These were almost certainly the earliest examples of the style. The Minoan palace architecture (in the absence of temples the only comparable technique there) was more recent. The Greeks added the roof to this system, and stylized and somewhat refined it. In general, Greek architecture had been oriented to ornamentation rather than practical necessities.

Intellectually, the ancient Greeks were very much influenced by the Egyptians. Thales, one of the earliest philosophers, developed geometry by introducing it from Egypt and improving it from the Egyptian technique of land measurement along the Nile.

Hippocrates is another example. He, too, had been to Egypt and surely influenced by medical developments there²³. The influence of the Egyptians, Minoans, Mesopotamians, and also of the Persian and Indian medical systems upon Greek medicine in several aspects is well known²⁴. For a great majority of

21 Örs, *op. cit.* (1974).

22 Toynbee, *op. cit.*, pp. 698-99, table 5.

23 Naguib Riad, *La Medecine au Temps des Pharaons*, Paris: Maloine, 1955, pp. 119-21.

24 Charles Singer, *A Short History of Medicine. Introducing Medical Principles to Students and non-medical readers*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, (1928), rep. with corr. 1944, pp. 3-9.

western writers the kind of medicine which we may call rational, devoid of irrational, spiritual aspects, begins in ancient Greece and with Hippocrates. We can accept that there is indeed room for truth in this statement; a truth, all the same, that should not be exalted and brought to the status of a dogma²⁵. And those who think so must know that medicine in Egypt and that of Mesopotamia had a great effect, from the rational aspect, on Greek medicine²⁶; or that such a *scientific* medicine had already begun in ancient Egypt²⁷; that, at least, the Mesopotamians had shown efforts in this area, the Egyptians had from time to time tried, and the Greeks, finally, realized it²⁸.

Paleopathological studies (see below) on the skeletal remains of various ancient peoples have indicated that relatively few individuals lived beyond middle life at those times, and that the ancient Greeks were no exception in this respect²⁹. This reflects, above all, the level of development of medicine as a whole and other technical fields in the ancient Greek as well as in any other ancient civilization.

The same thing can surely be said of any other field in those times, astronomy and mathematics for instance³⁰. Plato and certain other Greek scholars had been taught in Egypt³¹.

Besides all these considerations, it is now generally accepted that the beginning of the historical process called Greek civilization was in Western Anatolia and the neighbouring islands rather than in the Greek peninsula and archipelago³². Many creative Greeks, who first elaborated what had come down to them from the earlier civilizations, lived in the for-

25 Yaman Örs, *Medicine and its Education. With Five Teachers*, (unpublished English version of the specialty thesis, Dept. of the History of Medicine, Ankara Medical Faculty), pp. 232-33.

26 Aydın Sayılı, *Mısırlılarda ve Mezopotamyalılarda Matematik, Astronomi ve Tıp*, ("Mathematics, Astronomy and Medicine in Egyptians and Mesopotamians"), Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yay., 1966, pp. 490-91.

27 Riad, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

28 Georges Contenau, *La Medecine en Assyrie et en Babylonie*, Paris: Maloine, 1938, p. 170.

29 M.S. Goldstein, "Human Paleopathology," *J. Nat. Med. Ass.*, 1963, pp. 100-106.

30 Sayılı, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

31 Riad, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

32 Örs, *op. cit.* (1974).

mer - they were Ionians: Diogenes, Homer, Herodotus and others³³. From the neighbouring islands came Pythagoras, Hippocrates. Even an attribute such as democracy, traditionally held to be of Greek origin, had its roots elsewhere. The Hittites had constitutional kingdoms³⁴.

That the Greco-Roman society has been a very important link in the flow of civilizations, in the human process of civilization as a whole, is certainly an undeniable fact. However, that this society, ancient Greece in particular, was a *miracle* is a fallacy, an absurdity. Historical events are like any other fact in that they are, in principle, scientifically explainable. We may not be able to explain certain events of general importance (which is not relevant in the case of ancient Greece), but that does not mean that they are inexplicable. Miracles, on the other hand, are inexplicable and as such they cannot be the subject matter of objective historical study³⁵. Miracles are to be found in popular beliefs, tales, mythology, religion, dreams, but not in natural or social events that are to be studied objectively.

The Language: What it Means Historically

In the last chapter, the reader will find a synthesis of points discussed earlier. There I shall also treat the question of the relationship between the ancient Greek civilization and the modern Greeks. A closely related point is the subject of language which we can consider here separately and before the discussion of the themes of "writing" and "calendar" in the following chapters.

In his Study Toynbee gives us interesting and useful information as related to the place of language in the historical flow. There is the matter of language conduction, for instance. We see that the steppe, while providing no resting-place for sedentary peoples, affords great facilities for travel and transport, and has been a very important route in the distribution of certain languages or groups of languages: Berber, Arabic, Turkish, Indo-European. And the sea has had the same function in the

33 Sami Gürtürk, "Yanılıyorlar", ("They are Mistaken"), *Cumhuriyet*, Mar. 11, 1975.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

propagation of the Malay family of languages, the Polynesian language, Greek and, more recently, English³⁶.

Arabic was the official, religious, scientific, in short, general language of the Islamic world. Now, can we call the Islamic society an Arabic civilization? There were Iranians, Turks, Berbers and other peoples making the social body of that society. Jews contributed to it, especially in the scientific fields. We are then quite unjustified when we call it an Arabic civilization, a mistake made rather frequently.

We find the same attitude in the case of the ancient Greek society. The ancient Greeks were a seafaring people, who, through their mariners, spread their own language and "put it into currency" all around the Mediterranean³⁷. So? Were all the peoples speaking this language *Greeks*? Greek was mainly the mythological, literary, philosophical and scientific language of an important part of the Mediterranean area, but the people who used it in these domains were not necessarily Greeks.

After the downfall of the Roman Empire, which marked the end of the Greco-Roman society, and with the establishment of the East (Byzantine) and West Roman empires, the Greek language found the possibility of surviving in the former, and later in modern Greece. In the Roman Empire, Latin, which had followed the victorious Roman legions, developed as the general language³⁸, in the fields of literature, philosophy, science, and later in religion as Christianity spread. It was established as the official tongue of the Christian community. With the coming of the Renaissance, the weakening of the Church's influence in many fields, the development of nationalistic movements and other possible factors, modern languages began to develop from the *local* ones. Latin became less and less popular and finally a "dead language"³⁹. Now, could all the peoples using this language be called Latins?

It has indeed been shown that not only between two communities wide apart from each other in time but even between those

36 Toynbee, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-86.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 185-86.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 469.

39 Cf. Yaman Örs, "Tıp Dili, Doktorların Dili ve Türkçe", ("Medical Language, Doctors Language and Turkish"), *Çocuk Sağ. Has. Derg.*, 1972, pp. 317-27.

living in the same age, identity of language does not necessarily prove the existence of a direct socio-genetical connection. The reverse, we learn, is also true: There are communities who do not have the same tongue although their origins are the same⁴⁰.

Thus, although the language of ancient and modern Greece is virtually the same, this cannot be taken as a sufficient proof of a direct genetical connection between the ancient society and the modern people⁴¹.

There is an interesting field called "unreal history" which can be summarized as the study of "if it happened otherwise" and the "... might have been" in history. What if that event as we know it now had not happened or had happened in a different way?⁴² It may be said that it is fantasy. Even if it is, however, this field does not seem to be sheer nonsense. Anyway, this method seems quite applicable on an occasion connected with our theme in this chapter.

English had a rival when it was chosen or became officially the language of the United States. The other candidate was German, which lost only by one vote. If it had happened otherwise, we should surely witness interesting claims as to the origin of the peoples of that country. And let us just think if it had been Greek. They would have been, as a whole or for the most part, Greeks!

Writing: Does History Begin with it?

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra praises Cide Hamete Benengeli, the original Moorish author of the story of his "Don Quixote". He says that the latter is a very exact historian, very precise in all his details, as can be seen by his not passing over the various points, trivial and petty though they may be. "He should be an example", Cervantes goes on, "to those grave historians who give us so short and skimmed an account of events that we scarcely taste them ..."⁴³.

40 Glyn Daniel, *The Idea of Prehistory*, Harmondsworth (Middlesex): Penguin Books, 1964, p. 110.

41 Örs, *op. cit.* (1974).

42 Gillian Tindall, "Unreal History, J. C. Squire (ed.): *If it happened otherwise* (Book review)" *New Society*, 1972, p. 74.

43 Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, transl. by J. M. Cohen, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 77, 121.

With this *specific-oriented* view of history, Cervantes was pointing out the conception underlying the traditionalized historiography. This is, to borrow an expression aptly used, an *anecdotal-level view of history*. We can say that no significant change has taken place in this area from the author's time until recently.

In our present dynamic conception of the field, knowledge of the specific will have been made use of only if and when it has become a means for general conclusions.

The orientation of historical studies to what is specific, to details, must have gone parallel to the view that history begins with writing. For it is by the agency of language, and in a permanent manner through written language (sound recording methods are quite recent) that the widest and most detailed exchange of knowledge is realized among human beings. And when history is regarded as the method that gives us the most detailed knowledge about the past, we should find its beginning in that of its foremost means, writing⁴⁴.

There are two points here that must be seen from a critical angle. First, the word "history", whose etymology is not significant in this context, has two main meanings that would interest us: (a) the past of the societies, whether ancient or modern; (b) the study of this subject by dint of different means, and almost exclusively by means of written sources according to the traditional views in which history "is a systematic written account of events ..." ⁴⁵. Secondly, on the other hand, there exists an area called "prehistory". This is the field where unwritten remains of the early past of men are studied. These remains are either archeological - tools, weapons, houses, temples, paintings, tombs, forts and so on; or those which are not artifacts, like the flora and fauna that surrounded early man and which he utilized⁴⁶.

Another source of this kind is the direct bodily remains of human beings, their bones, skin and hair⁴⁷. Actually, this source is a most important one and transcends the scope of prehistory,

44 Cf. Örs, *op. cit.* (1975).

45 Webster's Third New Internat. ... (1961), *op. cit.*

46 Daniel, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

archeology and physical anthropology. The whole skeletons and mummies of men (and animals) as well as their piecemeal remains can be investigated from the medical aspect and there is a corresponding distinct field called paleopathology⁴⁸. Occasionally works of art (such as statuettes) can be studied for this purpose, when they reveal findings of medical interest⁴⁹. We can even add such objects as the ancient coins, for instance, with human heads showing goitre⁵⁰.

The change in Egyptian physiognomy can be clearly traced in the tomb-paintings and reliefs of the Eighteenth Dynasty because in the past century officers serving in the Pharaoh's foreign campaigns were in the habit of bringing back the most handsome female captives, whom they then married⁵¹.

Old toys that have survived can illuminate the past and provide information about the social, economic and other aspects of life of a period. Among the Roman toys, for instance, we see the lead soldiers, tiny war-like figures that have been found scattered around Europe⁵².

All such unwritten remains of the past enlighten us not less, depending on the occasion, than the written records on the past of man either before or after the beginning of writing. And in the former case it is the only method. Besides, let us not forget that writing was in the beginning independent of language, and only later became a tool of the latter, corresponding exactly to the spoken unit⁵³.

Of course, written records and unwritten remains are complementary and not exclusive. They may be contradictory sometimes, but even this is a form of completion.

There is an interesting instance in history where the archaeological findings cast doubt on the value of its written his-

48 Goldstein, *op. cit.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 Gerald D. Hart, "Even the Gods Had Goitre," *Canad. Med. Ass. J.*, 1967, pp. 1432-36.

51 Leonard Cottrell, *The Lost Pharaohs*, London: Pan Books, 1972, pp. 174-75.

52 Trevor Mann, "How Toys Began," *Proc. roy. Soc. Med.*, 1975, pp. 39-42.

53 Ignace J. Gelb, "Writing," In: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, London: Encyclopedia Britannica Ltd., 1963, vol. 23, pp. 813-15.

tory. That is the famous Trojan war which Homer wrote about in his epics, the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey". To its customary "romantic" interpretation (family vendetta) has been added, by the most recent historians, the economic view - an undertaking of Mycenaean imperialism⁵⁴. Contrary to widespread beliefs, however, which originated from those who made the earlier excavations, the German ancient historian, Dr. Helmut Berve, claims that there is nothing positive to prove that the Trojan war might have happened. He has shown evidences for it from the archeological and historical findings, and from the epic itself. "How much fantasy must have been offered to save a historical nucleus of the myth and of Homer's poem. ... According to the present state of research one can say that the Trojan war did not take place - or, to be precise, that there is no proof of the Trojan war."⁵⁵

The meaning of the word *history* depends, naturally, on what you would like to mean by it. Ideally, and in a more general and dynamic sense, it should comprise the events before as well as after the development of writing. Such should be the case also in history as a field of study of these events. Then history in the dynamic sense becomes *history proper* plus *prehistory*. That is, the study and account of any written document (from the literary works to the books of history) plus that of any unwritten remain from the past, coming down either from the pre- or post-writing period. Historians do use the archeological material or the information obtained from them in their study of history.

Like many concepts in such differing domains as philosophy and daily life, the traditional concept in the field of history reveals the impact of the past upon ourselves. Interestingly, even the word "prehistory", which has been in use for about 125 years⁵⁶, suggests that there must be a "history" in the strict or narrower sense of the word. The self-centered or anthropocentric view of events lead us to think that as languages and particularly writing are distinctly human achievements, so history and the study of history must begin with the latter.

54 Nagel's Encyclopedia - Guide: *Turkey*, Geneva: Nagel, 1968, pp. 370-71.

55 Gerhard Prause, "Der trojanische Krieg fand nicht statt. Professor Berve: Die Forschung gibt keine Anhaltspunkte," *Die Zeit Magazin*, June 13, 1969, pp. 45-46.

56 Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

Writing was also, and like urban life and metallurgy, a characteristic of civilizations⁵⁷. Interestingly, however, the Andean, Mayan and later Central American civilizations had, at most, only a very crude form of writing^{58,59}.

Its development led to the appearance of written sources—documents and remains, whether on paper, papyrus, hide, linen and other material, or on clay tablets (Mesopotamia) and temple columns and walls (Egypt). And “history”, in the second sense of the word, began to be written⁶⁰. However, this has not been the so much needed universal history⁶¹ covering the whole flow of human communities and societies. Hence expressions like *before history* or *prehistory*.

Which Calendar?

It seems that once misconceptions are established in an area it becomes difficult to see what is true. The recognition of the Americas by Westerners has come to be regarded as the discovery of these continents in spite of the existence of earlier human communities and societies that had been living there for centuries.

Among such instances in the field of history we have the question of the calendar. Here something that is not universal has become almost universally accepted: Christ's birth as the beginning of calendar. In actual fact, this incident has had some meaning only for Western society because it grew out of the Christian community⁶². The influence of the former upon the rest of the world has brought in its wake the acceptance of its specific calendar.

All societies had their own calendar and its beginning depended on an event important and meaningful for that particular society. The Egyptians, Babylonians, Hittites, Greeks ac-

57 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

58 J. Aldon Mason, *The Ancient Civilizations of Peru*. Harmondsworth (Middlesex): Penguin Books, 1961, pp. 73, 199, 226 and *passim*.

59 George C. Vaillant, *The Aztecs of Mexico*, Harmondsworth (Middlesex): Penguin Books, 1964, pp. 36, 39, 40 and *passim*.

60 Örs, *op. cit. loc. cit.*

61 Daniel, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–46.

62 Örs, *op. cit. loc. cit.*

cepted various incidents as the dates of the beginning⁶³ - a natural phenomenon such as floods coupled with the appearance of a star, a socio-religious event such as the construction of a temple, a socio-political one like succession of a king to the throne or a socio-biological event such as the repeated sports activities. In the case of Islamic society it was the migration of the Prophet Mohammed, a religious event. And such has been in the Christian community, this time the birth of the Prophet. However, and interestingly, there is no record of Christ in the Roman archives, either for his birth or his life⁶⁴. Now, we take this specific *event* as the beginning of our modern calendar.

Besides, we thus take a *zero point* and enumerate the events before in a regressive succession or opposite direction in time. Hence the expressions *B. C.*, *A. D.*, *the Christian era*, *our* (that is, the Christians' *and* the world's!) *era*.

So, apart from not being universal for humanity as a whole, the Western system of calendar is not practicle at all so far as history as a serious field goes, to say the least of it.

Ideally, a definite point in time, a definite date remote enough would suitably be taken as the beginning of a universal calendar. We would then get rid of this *before* and *after* business. Besides remoteness in time and universality, the date under discussion should have a meaning for the choice.

We do have such a point of time which indeed fits the requirements of our ideal model. By the aid of astronomy, the date of introduction of calendar in ancient Egypt has been computed, and according to a well-known Egyptologist this is the earliest dated event in human history⁶⁵. If we take this as the beginning of our universal calendar, the year of 1975, for instance, becomes $4236 + 1975 = 6211$.

Now, this date is acceptable as being remote enough and universal, because it dates back to the beginning of the most ancient civilization and was the earliest dated event in man's past. It is meaningful for our context because it is the beginning

63 Melih C. Anday, "Zaman Bölünür mü?", ("Can Time be Divided?"), *Cumhuriyet*, Jan. 3, 1975.

64 *Ibid.*

65 Douglas Guthrie, *A History of Medicine*, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960, p. 20.

of the calendar itself in the known world of civilizations. Remote enough, again, to cover that part of the historical flow which took place after the introduction of writing, the latter apparently being not older. At least, we know of no written record which has remained from before that date, and actually even from centuries after.

We do not have to worry then about the *before calendar times* and its division into definite centuries, years, as there existed no such means as writing to give us detailed information about what was going on.

The introduction of calendar and the development of writing together constitute a turning point in history, both so far as the historical flow and studies on it are concerned. Let us not forget, however, that in the absence of a really developed form of writing in the Central American civilizations, we see the existence of a highly developed calendar system⁶⁶.

The Inevitable Objectivity

In the light of what we have seen in former chapters we can now come to certain related points where subjectivity prevails, make a succinct critical evaluation of them, and try to offer their corrections according to objective criteria.

First of all, is modern Greece an extension of ancient Greek civilization, and should we think of the modern Greeks as the genetic products and cultural heirs of the ancient society? This has been customarily claimed by many western and, understandably, Greek intellectuals. In reality, however, such claims of continuity are unfounded from certain basic points, and it should be said that they are largely untrue, trivial, and of little value, being essentially imaginary and prone to political exploitation⁶⁷.

Firstly, and as I have discussed above, thus much is certain: A collapsed civilization disappears. Its institutional remnants, just like the structural ones, may survive, and continue to influence other societies. The civilization itself, however, has been wiped off for good, with no possibility whatever for renewal or *resuscitation*. Now, the Greek civilization, or more precisely

66 Vaillant, *op. cit.*, pp. 36, 37, 183-94 and *passim*.

67 Örs, *op. cit.*, (1974).

the Greco-Roman society, being one of the ancient civilizations, came to an end with the downfall of the Roman Empire at the end of its known development⁶⁸.

Secondly, we had seen in a former chapter that identity of language cannot be taken as a sufficient proof of direct genetical connection between the ancient and modern Greeks.

Thirdly, to what extent are today's Greeks the genetical continuation of the ancient people? I am not in a position to know the population movements - migrations, raids, invasions - in Greece since ancient times. Let us admit for the sake of argument that in the world today the men who are genetically most related to the ancient Greeks are the modern Greeks. All the same, this aspect does not seem to carry real weight in comparison with social and cultural characteristics. Furthermore, and very importantly, the same can be said of those people who live in Western Anatolia and Eastern Thracia today and who must supposedly be non-Greeks⁶⁹.

Here we come to a related question: the place of modern Greeks among the European peoples who have been the makers of the Renaissance movement and /or the builders of Western civilization as we know it today. Compared with those, say, of England, Holland, Belgium, Austria, or of Americas and Russians, what contributions have the modern Greeks made to the Western civilization in such basic areas as philosophy, art, science, technique, and politics within the past 150 years or so during which time they have been governing their own destinies?⁷⁰ What has the expected and more or less direct influence of the ancient society been in these domains? Except, apparently, the frequency of tricks in politics and diplomacy?

The last point can bring us, by association, to Byzantium, especially when thought of together with absolutism and religious fanaticism. (These were, by the way, also the qualities inherited by the Ottomans.) And although the Hellenic culture (in the fields of art and literature) came to Italy through contact with Byzantine scholars⁷¹, there has been definitely no his-

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*

71 Toynbee, *op. cit.*, p. 798.

torical connection between the ancient and modern Greeks in such respects. There may survive certain popular beliefs and practices locally, but we can see such a connection between the old and the modern almost anywhere,

All these points can be explained by recourse to historical flow. With the appearance of the West and East Roman Empires began the development of two different societies. Out of the Western empire the Catholic Church developed. Much later, with the coming of the Renaissance, began the development of Western civilization in roughly the same area. The East Empire or Byzantium evolved into the Orthodox Christian society (together with its younger Russian offshoot). Its territory was later occupied by the Ottoman Empire.

Now, although both of these societies are affiliated, to use Toynbee's expression, to the Hellenic civilization or the Greco-Roman society, they had characteristics of their own. And although the Orthodox society has been assimilated into the social body of Western civilization, others in the way of extinction such as the Islamic and Hindu societies are also under the influence of the latter⁷².

In short: Today's Greeks are not the heirs of the ancient society, neither have they played any role in the building of what is called *the West*. I think that the sameness of the site, the ethnic relationship, the identity of language and other possible points must not be taken, after all that we have discussed, as the proof of a historical continuity, either direct or indirect.

It was not in Greece but in Italy, where commercialized and industrialized city states developed as in ancient Greece, that the Western Renaissance began⁷³.

The claim of the "uniqueness" of historical events⁷⁴ must come from their two interrelated features: orientation to the past and the apparent nonrepeatability. They happened, and happened once. It would be more scientific to speak of specificity instead of uniqueness. In science, no event can be unique, otherwise there could be no comparability which is the starting

72 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

73 *Ibid.*, pp. 234, 800.

74 Sander, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

point of scientific endeavour. No two living bodies, animal or vegetable, are exactly alike, but that does not invalidate the sciences of physiology, biology, botany, zoology, ethnology⁷⁵, and medicine.

However, the subject matter of history is too complex to allow the field to become a science, as I have tried to explain in the first chapter. Sociology seems to be the nearest field. As one writer puts it, the more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both⁷⁶.

And the more we see history as a means rather than as an end in itself, the more scientific, I think, it will become, and the more useful. It must give us clarity in our concepts in general topics of sociology, economics, politics and so on, and not only inform us.

Although history cannot be a science like chemistry, biology or psychology, it can be scientific both in the sense of yielding general results, however low in probability, and in the sense that the methods of positive sciences can be applied in the field. Thirdly, and most importantly in our context, it should and can carry a quality of objectivity.

True, the (written) facts of history never come to us "pure", since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: They are always refracted through the mind of the recorder⁷⁷. The historians' material can never be "hard facts" but are products of selection, and which have been subject to interpretation⁷⁸. Indeed, historical events are not mere facts but truths, embracing both a statement of fact and a value judgement⁷⁹.

All the same, and whatever the point of departure, the purpose may be, historical studies must comprise a nucleus, a core which is scientific especially in the sense of being objective. It must have something of general and lasting value as in the case of the true sciences, and indeed in any really constructive human activity.

75 Toynbee, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

76 E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, Harmondsworth (Middlesex): Penguin Books, 1967, p. 66.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

78 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-30.

79 *Ibid.*, pp. 131-32.

Otherwise it is subjective, nonscientific history as we see in the biased nationalistic, racist or ideological products. One must perhaps need what a third, that is, impartial, body thinks on such issues as those regarding nations. We should be able to read such works on history, as Bertrand Russell has suggested. And I think the same thing can be said in the case of civilizations.

One can surely identify himself or herself, as an intellectual, as the citizen of a modern state, with a past society related to one's own or which lived long ago in the same geographic area. Or one can feel very much interested in the earlier though definitely different inhabitants of that site. We see the instances of both.

In the United Republic of Egypt you see the drawings of pyramids, temples, ancient statues, reliefs as symbols almost everywhere from the official airlines' street windows to the paper towels of tourist hotels. The purpose, however, seems to be not only touristic. The original statues from ancient Egypt in the squares of Cairo are an interesting sight to see. Even more interesting is the modern statue with the figures of a sphinx and a standing woman symbolizing the unity of the ancient and modern Egypt.

In Central and South America intellectuals and the states seem to have a concern about the ancient Central American and Andean civilizations. The underlying motive must be intellectual as well as touristic and economic. There must be more to it than appealing to the underdeveloped American population which is historically more recent in comparison with its Egyptian counterpart.

In both cases the ancient civilizations are *psychologically owned* by the modern states and the enlightened. There exist populations coming from the ancient societies and which have accepted, willingly or unwillingly, what the late comers, the Arabs and the Spaniards, have brought. And the late comer has begun to own *the people* with its ancient constructive features, as well as the land, in its depth in time.

Such attitudes can be accepted as *normal* when they do not reach an extreme and blur the facts, as in the case of cer-

tain westerners and Greeks of our time in their effort to see themselves as a continuation of the ancient Greek society. If you can see the difference, the separateness of the old and the new in spite of similarities in, say, races or languages, then you do have the right, objectively so to speak, to identify yourself with the past.

Bertrand Russell calls a fundamental characteristic of living beings "the chemical imperialism": What they get from their environment, from the outer world is turned into substances identical with those that compose them, that is, these are assimilated. As the philosopher draws our attention, man has gone very far in this respect.

Further than that, however, men have another fundamental quality by which we can explain their behaviour, their actions as individuals and as groups from a psychobiological standpoint. This is related to his place in the evolutionary development, his psychosocial level as we know it today. We can call this quality *the psychic imperialism*. We can clearly see this or, more precisely, its share in different sorts of significant human behaviour - from the urge and efforts of imposing one's will or thoughts on others, in the relation between children and their parents, in transactions or activities between human beings in general, in discussions or disputations, on political issues for instance; to racial prejudice, sociopolitical actions, the efforts of forcing those from another religion to renegade, and the activities of one country to dominate the others. That is, to make our own, or one of us, those who are not, and to keep *out of our boundaries* those whom we cannot or we shall not be able to; just as we behave in the same way toward what is *not-self* at the biochemical level and in the phenomena of immunity. An extreme state of psychic imperialism in individuals must surely be indicating a deeply lying psychic weakness, an important degree of inner loneliness and, as is expressed in psychiatry today, the inability to stand firm and on one's own⁸⁰.

I believe that an undue inclination to subjectivity in the field of history, to try to *own* the beginning of civilization or even of mankind, originate from deviant psychic imperialism.

The development of species consciousness, in historians as well as in people at large, can give the study of history a really objective as well as comprehensive quality.

80 Örs, *op. cit.* (*Medicine and its Education ...*)